

Methodological Mapping

By Henk Slager

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Since the 2003 Venice Biennial (Dreams and Conflicts, 2003), it hardly seems possible to discuss today's visual art practice without mentioning the concept of zone. The Italian curator Massimiliano Gioni even described his presentation of topical Italian artists in that biennial as The Zone. In Gioni's view, Italy could almost be considered a geopolitical prototype of the concept of zone. Italy's inner borders have an arbitrary character because of historical junction, and recent political developments also seem to have displaced the outer borders of Italy's unstable territory into the direction of Albania or even Africa.

In Dreams and Conflicts, the concept of zone has been deployed even more radically by curator Hou Hanru. He decided to redefine the space of contemporary art as Zone of Urgency. In this artistic zone, the unremitting urge for the most recent products should be stopped for good. Instead, room should be cleared for recreating a significant domain in the form of a nonlocalizable territory, a zone where both artists and spectators could be involved in an aesthetic commitment. (1)

However, in order to realize such a zone, visual art needs to develop entirely novel strategies, Hou says. Those strategies could adopt the form of deploying urban surroundings as a laboratory for survival, or as networks of activism directed towards the economic hegemony of multinationals. Moreover, in the zone of urgency, visual art should focus on temporary collaborations with other fields such as design, architecture, and discourse production while critically demanding novel forms of imagination and freedom.

To what extent does current art education succeed in anticipating the contours of a novel artistic zone? Even in our day, the curricula of many institutes for art education turn out to be dominated largely through an art historical model of thought. As a consequence, one gratuitously deploys a clear-cut marked duality: on the one hand, artists produce artistic work, while on the other hand, external professionals (mostly art historians) supply frameworks for interpretation of those works. The last decades, standard works such as Ernst Gombrich's Art and Illusion and Hans-Georg Gadamer's Truth and Method have provided a methodological foundation for such nearly dogmatic art historical hermeneutics. (2)

However, today's practice of visual art, engaging in the exploration of zones, makes clear that it is time to declare monolithic thought framed in binary models of truth (the hermeneutic method) and illusion (the visual creative) as obsolete. Moreover, it seems that the practice of "zone exploring art" shows that art and method could connect in a novel and constructive way.

In such a connection, the emphasis will shift from an art practice focused on final products to a practice directed towards an experimental, laboratory-style environment, exploring novel forms of knowledge and experience. In other words, artistic practice has become a dynamic point of departure for interdisciplinary experiments governed by a reflexive point of view.

This critical reflection deals with questions such as what makes art art, what art should be, and what the context of art is. Such a conception of artistic activity causes many present-day artists to be challenged in viewing their artistic projectivity as forms of research.

Obviously, the approach of art in terms of artistic research has considerable, institutional consequences, since the focus on research requires an adequate curriculum from the side of (advanced) art education. Ute Meta Bauer's publication *Education, Information, Entertainment* gave a first impetus to critical reflection on such a curriculum. (3) Bauer argues that the curriculum of art academies should radically break with the (art historical) paradigm of autonomous art in order to be able to anticipate the artistic developments of today. Furthermore, art academies and their curricula should particularly focus on the cultural preconditions of visual art, i.e., on the circumstances and conditions which enable artistic activities. Actually, this means that the reflexive attention to art education should depart from researching "the political, social and media-related conditions which decisively determine the artistic concepts and practice," says Ute Meta Bauer.

These research questions make clear that it is urgent to reflect on the specificity of artistic research whether institutionalized or not. It seems that in such context the differences and similarities with other forms (alpha, beta and gamma) of research should particularly be investigated. After all, artistic research seems to thwart continuously academically defined disciplines. In fact, art knows the hermeneutic questions of the humanities; art is engaged in the empirically scientific method; and art is aware of the commitment and social involvement of the social sciences.

It seems, therefore, that the most intrinsic characteristic of artistic research is based on the continuous transgression of boundaries in order to generate novel, reflexive zones. However, what then are the criteria determining the object of knowledge as zone-exploring activity?

The concept of research evokes unmistakably certain expectations. After all, research implies an organized manner of approach, a systematic treatment of information, and a significant contribution to the information and knowledge economy. Furthermore, research could imply ethic responsibilities such as a better understanding or improvement of the world. Does that indicate, though, a characteristic element of research? One could say that each form of research seems to be focused on how to formulate a methodology.

Research might not be inspired by a great cause or an accidental discovery ('serendipity'), yet may ultimately lead to a novel, methodologically formulated form of knowledge. The force of the method seems to determine the value of the results. In that context, incidentally, a continual control should clarify to what extent methodological conditions have been applied. Moreover, although research methods obviously differ regarding field and subject, they still share a fundamental basic principle: methodological research is primarily directed toward formulating questions (De Landa: pointing out problematic fields) and towards providing answers. Thus, it seems that research as such could be described most adequately as the methodological connection of both questions and answers, and answers and questions.

As argued above, a similar attention for the concept of research could currently be observed in today's practice of visual art. However, the mostly trans- or interdisciplinary research of visibility conducted by artists in their artistic practice is not really characterized by an objective, empirical approach. After all, by definition, art does not strive for generalization, repetition and quantification. Rather, art is directed towards unique, qualitative, particular, and local knowledge. In that respect, artistic activities still seem to perfectly match Baumgarten's classic definition of the aesthetic domain, where knowledge is described as a knowledge of the singular. (4) Although artistic knowledge as "mathesis singularis" - because of its focus on the singular and the unique - cannot be comprised in any sense in laws, it indeed deals with a form of knowledge, says Baumgarten. Yet, the emphasis on the singular and the unique in the aesthetic domain does not imply that artistic research would be impossible, as for example the philosopher of science Karl Popper tried to substantiate. After all, an operational form of research seems to entirely satisfy the most fundamental research criteria, i.e., focus on the importance of communication, a critical attitude, and autonomy of research.

In contrast to academic-scientific research emphasizing the generation of "expert knowledge", the domain of art seems to rather express a form of experience-based knowledge. Whereas pure scientific

research often seems to be characterized by purposeful uselessness, artistic research indeed focuses on involvement, on social and non-academic goals. That does not preclude the fact that artistic research as a form of idiosyncratic research still should be able to answer two well-defined questions.

Firstly, how could autonomous research take place significantly in the domain of visual art?
Secondly, how could the chosen methodology (as compared with research projects of other artists) be described?

One could conclude that artistic researchers continuously need to deploy a meta-perspective in order to enable critical reflection on both position and situation of the temporary, operational parameters of the research project. Such a methodology could be considered a form of two-plane analysis based on a dual, methodological research perspective, i.e., knowledge economy and ethic responsibility.

Plane 1: The perspective of the first plane is expressed in Jean-Francois Lyotard's postmodern maxim that, in their research of visibility, artists should pose the epistemological question of what art is. Or better put, in their transcendental research, artists should investigate whether the institutional or territorial foundations of the concept of art should be deconstructed or not.

With this, questioning the essence of art implies questioning the concept of art. That is, "a work of art is a kind of proposition presented within the context of art as a comment on art." If this perspective is implemented too extremely or too one-sidedly, then art risks becoming the equivalent of its definition. "Art has evolved in such a way that the philosophical question of its status has almost become the very essence of art itself, so that the philosophy of art, instead of standing outside the subject and addressing it from an alien and extended perspective, became instead the articulation of the internal energy of the subject. It would today require a special kind of effort at time to distinguish art from its own philosophy.

Plane 2: The perspective of the second plane is clearly underscored by Merleau-Ponty's definition that the artist has the capacity to observe what others keep unnoticed. After all, through mere visual means, the artist succeeds in making visible what ordinary vision fails to see. Because of that, the everyday categories of perception become dislocated in a flash.

The artist compels us to see - for one moment - the world in a different way: according to different norms, according to different habits: not in images ultimately replacing reality, but in images as novel visibilities. With that, art determines a variety of polymorphic ways for flexible observation. The artistic image provides an open view while liberating the spectator from a frozen perspective. "Essence or existence, imaginary or real, visible or invisible, art disrupts all our categories by revealing its dream universe of sensuous essences, of striking similarities and silent meanings."(5)

From that perspective, artistic research is also connected with the search for a critical understanding of our existential conditions and the formulation of (utopian) proposals for improvement. Such a modernist view is inseparably linked with an emancipatory ideal, i.e., artistic research should educationally be based on the ethical guideline of human freedom.

These planes of research correspond to the impetus of Immanuel Kant's two Critiques, i.e., the Critique of Pure Reason about the foundation of human knowledge, and the Critique of Practical Reason about the preconditions of human morality. However, as a continuation, Kant also formulated a third critique, the Critique of Judgement, where he envisions art as an interstitial space, a zone, where both faculties of cognition, pure reason and practical reason, meet.

The perspective of a third space as reflexive zone seems to be of immense, topical interest in today's visual art, certainly after the two episodes of modernism and postmodernism where the two planes of analysis mentioned above become emphasized unilaterally. Today, artistic research takes place in a (meta)operational and experimental way in a zone determined by a configuration of these two planes.(6)

However, different from one-dimensional scientific research, the methodological perspective of artistic research cannot be decided a priori. After all, artistic research as an operational process is "an open-

ended work-in-pre-growth."(7)

Thus, in artistic practices, there is not something as a form of art entirely defined beforehand. As a consequence, it is by definition impossible to research the artistic process in a manner assuming that such definition would exist. Therefore, in artistic research, one should speak of a continuous, self-reflexive movement questioning the situation and determining a position with regard to the above-mentioned configuration of spaces of analysis.

Obviously, while determining a position, the issue is not a fixed concept or a static point, but the indication of a zone leaving unmarked room for the continuation of artistic experiment. As a consequence, artistic research continually produces novel connections in the form of multiplicities characterized by temporary, flexible constructions.

These constructions run up against problems, but rather than creating solutions, they keep on deploying novel methodological programs while producing continuous modifications.

In sum, topical research creates methodological trajectories determining how, why and where the operational research proceeds while engaging in critical, parallel discourses. Such a model is in continuous flux: as a work in progress it always involves articulation, segmentation and reconstruction.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari describe the zone as a nonlocalizable relation of speed and slowness. One could argue that the non-localizable zone of artistic research is characterized by reflecting interactions, by accelerating speed, and by mutating flows of thought. Such a refuge of artistic research could be cut through by a relative stoppage of flows of thought and by points of accumulation intending to introduce forms of rigidity in the variety of flows of reflection.

In both processes, the two planes of analysis play a decisive role. Not surprisingly, the artistic methodology as an operational, cartographic composition does not offer a closed system with a localizable structure of components. In line with Deleuze and Guattari, one could argue that the zone of artistic research "always has detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and multiple entryways"(8) and idiosyncratic lines of flight.

It is for that reason that it is only possible at the end of operational research to determine whether the trajectory of the proposed methodological process has indeed produced interesting connections, accelerations and mutations. Artistic research can never be characterized by a well-defined, rigid methodology. Rather, its form of research could be described as a *methodicee*: a strong belief in a methodological result founded by operational strategies which cannot be legitimized beforehand. Indeed, that is the essential characteristic of artistic research.

Notes

1. Cf. Henk Slager. *De Tussenliggende Noodzaak*, Biennial of Venice issue, *Metropolis M*, 3, 2003, pp. 21-25.

2. H.G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, Frankfurt/M., 1960. E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, London, 1960. Gadamer describes the encounter with visual art as an experience corresponding with intently reading a letter which also implies a certain expectation. Gadamer indeed realizes that every interpretation has a horizon, i.e. is rooted in a temporality, which also counts for human knowledge. However, in spite of such a sense of perspective, Gadamer still believes that, in encountering a work of

art, it must be possible to determine a significant meaning. Gombrich's work demonstrates a similar way of thought, where he spends many words on the conventional character of representation and the important role of the spectator in arriving at the intended meaning of the image - "the eye of the beholder." At the same time, Gombrich believes that it is indeed possible for adequate art historical research to arrive at an iconographically exact meaning of a certain image. In light of such arthistorical hermeneutics, the artistic image is, in fact, a mere substitute for one meaning. Cf. Henk Slager, *Archeology of Art Theory*, Amsterdam/New York, 1995, pp. 133-141.

3. Ute Meta Bauer, (ed.) *Education, Information, Entertainment*, Edition Selene, Vienna, 2001.

4. In his book *Aesthetica* (1758), Baumgarten introduced the concept of aesthetics as a philosophy of the senses. He says, "Aesthetics should investigate for accuracy analogous to logic, that is at the basis of scientific knowledge, the concepts constituting sensibility." In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes describes similar research as a *mathesis singularis*, "a science of the person, which can attain a generality which does not belittle nor shatter." [Cf. for a further survey, Henk Slager, *Formalistisch Temperament*, (PhD Thesis University of Amsterdam, 1989), chapter 4.5. *Mathesis Singularis*, pp. 189-194.]

5. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'Oeil et l'esprit*, Paris 1964, p.35.

6. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari alternate the concept of zone with plateau: a self-vibrating region of intensities characterized by the absence of a logical point of cumulation or crescendo. *A Thousand Plateaus*, London, 1988. See also Sarat Maharaj's description of plateau in *Dokumenta XI Catalogue*, "It is about duration, prolonged immersion, sustainable absorption - not retinal replication, but about production."

7. Annette W. Balkema and Henk Slager (eds.), *Artistic Research*, survey of a conference on the position of research in European Advanced Art Education, Amsterdam/New York, pg. 53.

8. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, London 1988, pg. 21.

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